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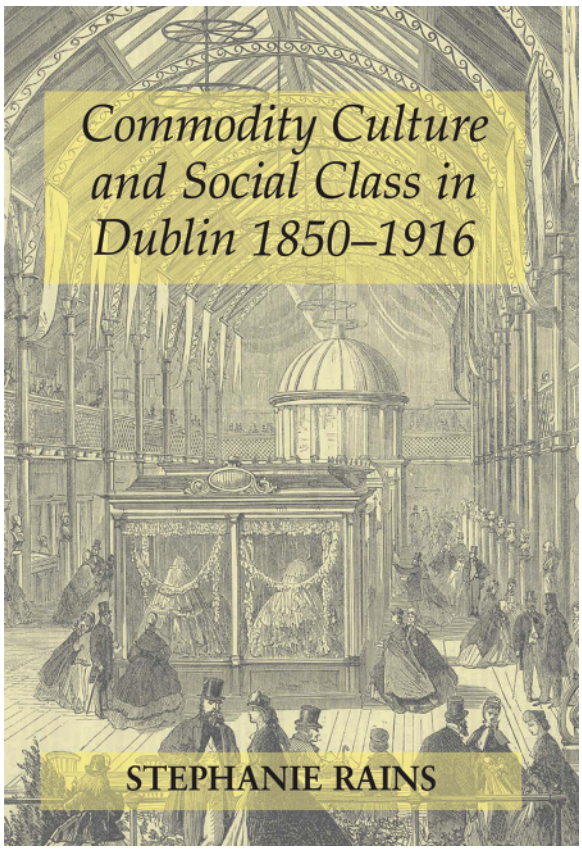
Commodity Culture and Social Class in Dublin 1850–1916

Stephanie Rains, *Irish Academic Press, 2010, 226 pp., 14 b&w illus. &15 plates, cloth €39.95. ISBN: 9780716530695*

In the last few days of November 2010 over 50,000 people marched in Dublin to the city's historic General Post Office (GPO) in protest at the government's acceptance of a €500 billion loan to bailout an embarrassing succession of irresponsible financiers and politicians. Remarkably, after an extraordinarily rapid ascendancy as one of the fastest growing Western economies, by the late twentieth century Ireland had the highest per capita debt in Europe. As the twentieth century drew to a close Ireland's economy, it turned out, was built on the shifting sands of an insatiable consumerism that seems now to be in some sort of retreat or eclipse. As protesters took to the streets in the very same part of Dublin, earlier that November Stephanie Rains' book *Commodity Culture and Social Class in Dublin, 1850–1916* was launched in the elegant tea-rooms of Clery's department store. It is, if anything, an extremely timely publication, as Rains herself acknowledges the complexity of modern consumer culture has a longer history in Ireland than is generally believed. Indeed, she states in her introduction, '[i]f there was as the T. D. Oliver J. Flanagan once claimed, no sex in Ireland before television, then apparently there was no shopping in Ireland before the Celtic Tiger' (p. 2).

What *Commodity Culture and Social Class in Dublin, 1850–1916* provides, for the first time, is a genealogy of Irish consumer identity and the culture of shopping (albeit in Dublin) in the years immediately after the cataclysmic Famine of the 1840s to the emergence of a new Irish nation in the embers of the 1916 Easter Rising. Rains does this by considering the interrelation of the eight major department stores, or the 'monster stores' as they become known as in



the Irish press, established in Dublin between 1850 and 1900 with the prolifigate commodity culture promoted at the several major industrial and international exhibitions that took place in Dublin including the 1853 Irish Industrial Exhibition, the 1865 Dublin International Exhibition, the 1872 Dublin Exhibition of Arts, Industries and Manufactures, the 1882 Exhibition of Irish Arts and Manufactures and the 1907 Irish International Exhibition as well as the series of philanthropic bazaars hosted by the Royal Dublin Society between 1892 and 1896 **[1]**. The crux of Rains' argument is that the construction of identity of a new Irish urbanized middle class in the post-Famine era, shaped through the culture of consumerism, is a major overlooked lacunae in Irish historiography. Indeed, she asserts '[u]rban life in Ireland has been especially under-researched, but what does exist mainly focuses on the Anglo-Irish elite and the extremely poor occupants of the tenements' and the overarching aim of her book, therefore, is to 'explore some of the social history of the Dublin middle classes through an examination of their relationship to the international flow of commodities' (p. 4).

Remarkably, Dublin's department stores, some of the earliest in Europe, and the city's successive great exhibitions of the mid-late nineteenth have been sparingly treated in Irish historical writing. Aside from a series of articles published in the 1980s and 1990s by Alun Davies, John Turpin and Nellie O'Cleirigh there has been little attention given to the display, distribution or consumption of goods in Ireland in this period.[1] Crucially, Rains provides us with the first detailed analysis in book-length form of the rise of shopping in Dublin and the city's great exhibitions, which have been dismissively treated, if at all, by generally accepted authoritative accounts of the great exhibition movement, such as Paul Greenhalgh's *Ephemeral Vistas: The Expositions Universelles, Great Exhibitions and World's Fairs, 1851–1939* (1988). What Rains' offers is a completely fresh perspective on the bourgeois consumption of design in terms of the quotidian, mass-manufactured goods of everyday material culture in Victorian and Edwardian Ireland, which is itself significant in that it signals a move away from the analysis of luxury handmade goods, studied largely through biography and connoisseurship, which has until very recently dominated Irish design history. By analysing the displays at Dublin's great exhibitions and their interrelation with the displays in the city's department stores in terms of middle-class aspiration and consumption, Rains breaks new ground and fills a major gap in Irish historiography. She structures her argument into five short, densely written chapters that thematically and chronologically chart the development of shopping at the nexus of a major transformation in Irish society, and in Dublin specifically, aided by the creation of new transport arteries, better systems of communications, the expansion of middle-class suburbs and the emergence of a new cosmopolitan Celtic *flâneur*. She also shows how, as the nineteenth century unfolded, middle-class identity become intractably enmeshed in the search for national identity, as the desire to develop 'a "modern" Irish economy in which trade and manufacturing would lead to economic prosperity' also implied 'political stability' (p. 71). The key shift took place in the 1880s when, Rains posits, there was an unquestionable politicization of Irish design. Whereas at the 1872 Dublin Exhibition of Arts, Industries and Manufactures, which was opened by Prince Alfred, Duke of Edinburgh, there was an emphasis on fine arts and an interpretation of Irish identity in terms of its context within the British Empire and imperial trade, by the time of the 1882 Dublin Exhibition of Irish Arts and Manufactures, the organizing committee was heavily influenced by Home Rule and Parnellite politics (p. 76).[2] By the 1880s Rains suggests that 'commodity culture in Dublin had become politicized, as well as political culture having become commodified' which was reflected in the support evinced by shops and exhibitions of 'native manufactures' a spirit which also saw the formation of 'buy Irish', and design reform, organizations such as the Irish Home Manufactures Association in

Fig 1. A postcard showing a general view of the 1907 Irish International Exhibition at Herbert Park in Dublin

1881, the Irish Industries Association in 1885 and the Arts and Crafts Society of Ireland in 1894 (p. 103). However, Rains further suggests that there is real complexity in untangling the often oversimplified relationship between nationalism, consumerism and design culture as she stresses that since the 1850s there had been rising concern in Ireland at the quality of imports, widely known as 'slop productions' and largely perceived to be from England (p. 25), and events such as the 1853 exhibition, paradoxically, 'far from stimulating production, as had been hoped, actually stimulated consumption instead – and much of it British exports' (p. 30).

What is refreshing, and so stimulating, about Rains' argument is her assertion of the complicit role of the middle classes in this democratization and politicization of design culture. Indeed, Rains argues that by 1907 the Irish International Exhibition was deliberately placed in Herbert Park in a south Dublin suburb to mirror the social and cultural aspirations of its intended audience. Some of the 'model houses' designed by commercial speculators for the exhibition still stand and are strikingly redolent of the ideas of the 'ideal home' movement in Edwardian and interwar England.[3] Other areas that Rains sheds fresh light on and opens up for future exploration are the gender identities of this new Irish urban middle class. Whereas female shopworkers and female consumers have been the subject of wide study 'as emblems of modernity' little has been written, particularly in an Irish context, about their male counterparts (p. 2). Whereas Rains' discussion of female shop girls follows much conventional thinking from similar British, European and North American studies which emphasize the 'moral perils' of girls from rural areas being assimilated into urban workforces, her analysis of male shopworkers takes us into much more unchartered territory (p. 178)—from the creation of a new 'labour aristocracy' among male shopworkers to the controversy of the 'enforced bachelordom' of the living-in system, which gave rise to a crisis of masculine identity, socially and sexually that was played out in politics, literature and, according to Rains, in consumer culture (p. 177). For example, Rains shows that it was not until the 1870s that the amount of women working in department stores increased and the worryingly effeminized identity of the male clerk in 'fashionable clothes' became less of a social concern (p. 66). The evolving identity of this new lower middle-class male clerk was a considerable

and continual site for social anxiety, and indeed a further example offered by Rains explores how such clerks became susceptible to incendiary politics and moved from 'petite bourgeoisie' to 'Fenian rebels' (p. 58). This is among one of the most insightful and original sections in Rains' book.

Rains concludes her narrative with a discussion of the Easter Rising in 1916 at Dublin's GPO on Sackville Street (now O'Connell Street) where Irish labour leader James Connolly hoped the uprising would strike at the very heart of modern capitalist society, metaphorically and physically, as some of Dublin's great department stores were located in the streets that radiate around the GPO; few of them were left unscathed by the events (p. 206). Even today, the GPO is a site where modern capitalist consumerism and Irish identity are conflated, as the protests of November 2010 demonstrate. Rains' skilfully written, brilliantly paced and remarkably rich study is a strikingly original, and timely, contribution to Irish design history. However, although Rains presents a convincing set of arguments, the treatment of Dublin in such isolation from other Irish cities—such as Cork or Belfast, which also contributed to the culture of the department store and hosted great international or industrial exhibitions—does feel, at times, like an oversimplification. Furthermore, the underlying suggestion that commodity culture in Ireland was largely new in the immediate post-Famine era is contradicted by the fact that there is much evidence to suggest consumerism and especially 'buying Irish' had been gathering pace since the eighteenth century.[4] However, as Rains argues, Dublin's department stores, as well as its great exhibitions, were much more than 'colonial mimicry' and 'suggest that class identities at least were considerably more delineated and more stable than national or political identities' (p. 201).[5]

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Notes

1 See A. C. Davies, 'Ireland's Crystal Palace, 1853', in J. M. Goldstrom and L. A. Clarkson (eds), *Irish Population, Economy and Society: Essays in Honour of the late K. H. Connell*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1981, pp. 249–69; J. Turpin, 'Exhibitions of Art and Industries in Victorian Ireland. Part I: The Irish Arts and Industries Exhibition Movement 1834–64', *Dublin Historical Record*, vol. 35, no. 1, December 1981, pp. 2–13, *idem*, 'Exhibitions of Art and Industries in Victorian Ireland. Part II: Dublin Arts and Industries Exhibition Movement, 1865–85', *Dublin Historical Record*, vol. 35, no. 2, March 1982, pp. 42–51; *idem*, 'Ireland's Progress: The Dublin Exhibition of 1907', *Éire-Ireland*, vol. 17, no. 1, Spring 1982, pp. 31–8; and N. O'Cleirigh, 'Dublin International Exhibition, 1865', *Dublin Historical Record*, vol. 47, no. 2, Autumn 1994, pp. 169–82.

2 Rains' point, here, might have been strengthened by reference to the wider context of the unquestionably political uses of Irish design at exhibitions in Britain such as at the 1886 Edinburgh International Exhibition and the 1888 Irish Exhibition in London. For this context see B. Rooney, 'The Irish Exhibition at Olympia, 1888', *Irish Architectural and Decorative Studies: The Journal of the Irish Georgian Society*, vol. 1, 1998, pp. 101–19.

3 See D. S. Ryan, *The Ideal Home through the Twentieth Century*, Hazar, London, 1997.

4 For example, see S. Foster, 'Buying Irish: Consumer Nationalism in Eighteenth-Century Dublin', *History Today*, vol. 47, no. 6, 1997, pp. 44–51.

5 The concept of 'colonial mimicry', coined by Homi K. Bhabha in *The Location of Culture*, Routledge, London, 1994, pp. 85–92, has been employed in an Irish context in L. Litvack, 'Exhibiting Ireland, 1851–3: Colonial Mimicry in London, Cork and Dublin', in L. Litvack and G. Hopper (eds), *Ireland in the Nineteenth Century: Regional Identity*, Four Courts Press, Dublin, 2000, pp. 15–57.